

COMPETITIVE STRATEGY IN INFORMATION CONFRONTATION

CHRISTOPHER A. FORD

December 2022



LIVERMORE PAPERS ON GLOBAL SECURITY

NO. 11

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Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory

Center for Global Security Research

December 2022

Production Editor/Technical Editor: Kristine Wong

Graphics and Cover Design Production: Thomas Reason

This work was performed under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Energy by Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in part under Contract W-7405-Eng-48 and in part under Contract DE-AC52-07NA27344. The views and opinions of the author expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the United States government or Lawrence Livermore National Security, LLC.

ISBN-978-1-952565-16-8 LCCN-2022920836 LLNL-MI-841664 TID-67881-23

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About the Author

Christopher Ford was named in May 2022 to be a MITRE fellow and the first director of MITRE's Center for Strategic Competition. In this capacity, he runs MITRE's effort to apply interdisciplinary, cross-functional, "systems"-informed analyses to challenges of strategic competition. Mr. Ford is one of only 12 MITRE fellows in the corporation's history, and the first with a primarily policy background.

Mr. Ford served previously in government as U.S. assistant secretary of state for international security and nonproliferation, also fulfilling the responsibilities of the under secretary for arms control and international security. Prior to the State Department, he served as special assistant to the President and senior director for WMD and counterproliferation at the National Security Council. A former intelligence officer in the U.S. Navy Reserve and senior staffer on five different U.S. Senate committees, Mr. Ford has also served as U.S. special representative for nuclear nonproliferation and as a principal deputy assistant secretary of state.

A graduate of Harvard College (summa cum laude), Oxford University (where he received his doctorate in international relations as a Rhodes Scholar), and the Yale Law School, Mr. Ford is a visiting fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, as well as a distinguished fellow at the National Security Institute at George Mason University's Scalia Law School. A prolific scholar, he is the author of the books *China Looks at the West: Identity, Global Ambitions, and the Future of Sino-American Relations* (2015), *The Mind of Empire: China's History and Modern Foreign Relations* (2010), and *The Admirals' Advantage: U.S. Navy Operational Intelligence in World War II and the Cold War* (2005), as well as a great many articles and monographs. Mr. Ford is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, and the American Society of International Law. His personal website is <https://newparadigmsforum.com>.

Preface

Brad Roberts

With growing frequency in recent years, information warfare has become a topic of discussion in our CGSR workshops. Sometimes the catalyst has been a discussion of adversary strategies to deter the United States and its allies from certain courses of action. Other times it has been a discussion of how to integrate U.S. and allied capabilities for maximum benefit. Whatever the catalyst, it became clear that the community of U.S. and allied experts focused on deterrence, assurance, and strategic stability must become better informed about the efforts of Russia, China, and others to shape the information environment.

Accordingly, in September 2022, we convened a workshop to better understand the information confrontation strategies of Russia and China and the progress of the United States in coming to terms with them. We drew a number of conclusions from that effort.

First, the leaders of Russia and China have adopted long-term strategies for conflict with the United States (which they see as endemic and enduring) that give a central place to manipulation and exploitation of the information environment and corruption of the information ecosystem so that it better serves their purposes. U.S. allies are also in their information confrontation crosshairs. One result is that the information ecosystem is now congested, contested, and competitive.

Second, the United States has been slow to respond, though its efforts are now accelerating. Its responses have been largely ad hoc and bottom-up, with different agencies and entities putting in place the capabilities they need on a retail basis, as it were, in a competitive information environment where adversaries are actively attacking and manipulating the information ecosystem wholesale. Given the prominent place of disinformation in adversary strategies, and its past experiences with Soviet propaganda, U.S. initiatives have tended to focus on responding to false information and false narratives. The State Department's Global Engagement Center has rapidly adapted to these challenges. Like all start-ups, it has been through a trial-and-error phase. Nevertheless, more is needed, for a response that

focuses primarily on countering disinformation will fail to mobilize the actions needed to deal with multiple other facets of what is a very complex challenge. There can be no single silver bullet. A layered approach is needed. This must include sustained and effective partnerships with private sector actors in the information ecosystem. Despite important progress in recent years, the U.S. government still has a long way to go in developing strategy and policy and in enabling all of the needed partnerships.

Third, in U.S. military thought and deterrence strategy, the information ecosystem has an important but largely subsidiary role. U.S. military thought has emphasized the pursuit of information dominance. U.S. deterrence strategy has emphasized clear signaling for deterrence and assurance purposes. But in today's competitive environment and its complex information space, the United States can rely upon having neither dominance nor clarity. The information ecosystem, like the other "new" domains of cyber space and outer space, is congested, contested, and adversarial. As in these other domains, the last decade is noteworthy for the U.S. defense community's slow but steady recognition of the new problem and for its tendency to fall back on legacy thinking and approaches before beginning to adapt more effectively to new realities. Effective adaptation in all of these domains has been inhibited by some common obstacles. These include too little institutional capacity to review and update legacy concepts, too few integrators who link domain-specific knowledge to broader context, and so much lingering confidence in the backstop of U.S. military supremacy that it tempts us to ignore new challenges. To adapt "at the speed of relevance" requires addressing these structural factors.

Finally, the United States must and can do better in the competition of meta narratives. So far, at least, its responses to adversary information confrontation strategies have been more tactical than strategic. It has been less effective than it should be in framing the larger political context within which specific information battles are waged.

To help address this final point, we are very pleased to be able to publish this essay by Dr. Christopher Ford. It is ambitious in scope, as it sets out to frame the competition in meta narratives that Russia and China have brought to us as well as the needed response. And it is powerfully argued, with clear and compelling implications for U.S. policy. We hope that it serves as a catalyst for a more strategic response to the information confrontation strategies with which we must now contend.

Executive Summary¹

The Western democracies are in an “information war” being waged against them and their societies by official propagandists and purveyors of disinformation in the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns each operate in different ways, but they both present significant threats. It is critical to the development and implementation of effective counter-strategy that we understand not merely that the Putin regime and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) disseminate falsehoods, but why and for what purpose such lies are being spread. Russian and Chinese propaganda narratives are different in their nature because they support global strategies that have different types of objectives, with the result that they present correspondingly different types of information threats and call for different types of response.

CCP propaganda tends to tell a consistent narrative about the Party and about China, and seems genuinely to want the rest of the world to believe that story. In other words, China advances a storyline and intends to convince listeners that this storyline is true. China does not wish merely to undermine the existing world order, but rather to restructure the current international system into a much more Sinocentric form, where other states depend asymmetrically upon China and defer to the CCP’s wishes on matters of significance.

In informational terms, Beijing’s disinformation and propaganda advances a replacement narrative for postwar international norms of liberal democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. In support of a new, Sinocentric world-system intended ultimately to supplant the existing one, the CCP offers its own vision of a “‘harmonious’ and vertically constituted system of social order centered on China as the civilizational and politico-moral leader and norm-setter for the system.”

¹ This paper is based upon remarks Ford gave to a conference at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory on September 27, 2022. The views he expresses herein are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of anyone else.

In this alternative Chinese narrative: (1) the CCP's leaders are (like romanticized Confucian emperors of old) benevolent, omniscient, and incapable of error; (2) CCP-ruled China is a model of “harmonious” order and prosperity; (3) any problems in China are the result of malevolent foreign forces who conspire with domestic agents of disloyalty and disorder to prevent the Chinese people from fulfilling their destiny; (4) there are no universal standards of human rights, with such notions having only the meaning that individual governments wish to give them; and (5) Western liberal democracy is a dysfunctional fraud, for which the CCP has developed its own, superior alternative concept of “democracy,” which it offers to the world as a model for “harmony” everywhere.

For a replacement narrative to succeed, however, there must still be something called “truth,” and we are asked to accept China's narrative as this truth. This is a distinctive structural difference between Chinese and Russian propaganda, for the Russian approach to outward-facing propaganda has no desire to replace the narratives of the current international order with its own version, and seeks instead to undermine faith in the possibility of such narrative truth.

Russian narratives, however, are bifurcated. Within Russia itself, the Putin regime does push a replacement narrative. This vision depicts Russia as a distinct civilization having a unique essence and spirit that is constantly under threat—both physically and ideologically—from evil foreign forces against which Russians must always be vigilant, and in response to which it is necessary to organize politics along authoritarian lines. Domestically, the Putin regime promotes increasingly neo-tsarist or even fascist concepts of “blood and soil” ultranationalism, conservative social and religious mores, and authoritarian reaction. It advances this vision to replace both the Marxist-Leninist dogma of Soviet days and the incipient pro-Western liberalism of Russia's post-Cold War 1990s.

Internationally, however, the Putin regime promotes what might be termed a “wrecker's narrative”—one that aims not to cement in place an alternative vision, but rather to destabilize all such visions. The narrative warfare the Kremlin directs abroad is not about replacing the normative framework of Western modernity with a new one, but rather simply about destabilizing everyone else's storylines.

Russian propaganda is uninterested in consistency of message, and is comfortable advancing multiple, mutually-contradictory storylines at the

same time, in what has been called a high-volume, multi-channel “firehose of falsehood.” Some of this may be designed for tactical advantage, since it gives different pillars of the Russian disinformation ecosystem freedom to fine tune content for different audiences, facilitates nimble responsiveness to events, increases the odds of having a proffered narrative make the “first impression” upon targeted constituencies, and reinforces general impressions by through a barrage of contentions by multiple sources containing different arguments that point to the same conclusion.

Nevertheless, the refusal of Russian propaganda to offer any consistent and intelligible version of purported objective truth is more than simply tactical. The approach taken in Russia’s outward-facing propaganda and disinformation is every bit as structural, and as tied to the nature of Russia’s grand strategy, as is the CCP’s self-consistent meta-narrative of supposedly well-deserved Sinocentric inevitability. The Kremlin does not want to persuade others of its rectitude as part of claiming leadership of the world community. Rather, its main purpose in doing so is to feel powerful and important, frighten and intimidate its neighbors, and carve out strategic space in which its regime can consolidate a kleptocratic empire behind a buffer zone of brutalized subject states.

This objective entails a different—and in some ways more modest—set of “information warfare” objectives. To achieve its geopolitical goals, Russia need only undermine the rest of the world’s willingness to try to pressure Moscow to behave or hold it accountable for its misbehavior. To this end, the Kremlin seeks to break everyone else’s narratives and divide them against each other, apparently on the theory that the collapse of Western value-hegemony—and of the West’s willingness to defend its own values in the world—will leave the Putin regime sufficient space in which to do what it pleases.

Answering China’s narrative assault is perhaps the less challenging of the two, at least in principle, for we have historical experience with facing down information challenges from an adversarial regime that sought to persuade the rest of the world that our society was dysfunctional and unjust, and that its approach to sociopolitical organization represented the happy future of mankind.

To answer the CCP replacement narrative of Party rectitude and competence—and of the claimed desirability of “harmonious” global order under Chinese guidance—we must undercut the CCP storyline with effective

counter-narratives of our own. A replacement narrative fails if it cannot replace the traditional one, and Beijing both wants and needs the rest of the world to believe its own story. Accordingly, if we “break” that replacement narrative, the CCP loses its propaganda game.

An effective narrative counter-strategy would point out not merely tyranny, egregious human rights abuses, corruption, and crimes against humanity in China, but also structural flaws, weaknesses, and unsustainability in the CCP’s own approach to economic governance. Through identifying such problems, we could help dim the luster of the “China model” as seen through the eyes of leaders and populations in the developing world who might otherwise be tempted to trade their own (and their countries’) political autonomy for a measure of accelerated economic growth and development.

For many audiences, moreover, we should avoid overtures that make it seem as if we are seeking military alliances against China, for that is likely to be off-putting for countries in the developing world still in the sway of the ideal of “non-alignment.” Instead, we should point out that the issue is not fundamentally about “alliances” at all, but rather about the moral imperative of protecting the political, economic, and strategic autonomy of sovereign peoples against China’s efforts to enmesh them in exploitative webs of dependency, coercion, and subjugation.

This is perhaps, for Americans, an unaccustomed type of message. In the modern world, however, we have the chance to flip the narratives so long used against us in generations past, and champion efforts to preserve the autonomy and sovereignty of smaller and poorer countries against *Beijing’s* efforts to build a network of cowed tributaries. There is no reason for us to be shy about advancing such an anti-imperialist themes against Chinese imperialist hegemony, moreover, for these narratives have enormous benefit of being not only useful but also true.

We may, furthermore, wish to develop counter-narratives that undermine the CCP’s preening and self-aggrandizing story of itself inside China as well, for that narrative is vulnerable to puncture. One way to help deflate this myth is to highlight evidence of Party corruption, incompetence, and self-serving hunger for power—for these truths undermine the CCP’s legitimacy narrative of benevolence and competence, and refract damningly through the lens of thousands of years of Chinese political theory in which dynasties that exhibit those discreditable characteristics forfeit the Mandate of Heaven and lose their right to rule.

An additional way to puncture the CCP's narrative of itself would be to point out that its claims to be the exclusive vehicle through which China can achieve geopolitical greatness are simply false. The CCP frequently claims that none of China's progress would have been possible without the Party's enlightened leadership, but in fact the PRC's economic growth model was quite explicitly modeled upon approaches pioneered by the "Four Tigers" of East Asia (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan) and received a huge boost through American help and encouragement. These facts do not take away from the economic achievements of the Chinese people, but they undermine the CCP's self-glorifying narrative that the Party did this all by itself in the face of a hostile international environment that sought to "contain" China's rise. The facts also undermine the idea that *without* the CCP no such progress would be possible.

Looking ahead, furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that if China wishes to be seen as it depicts itself—that is, as a paragon of wisdom and moral virtue to which the other countries of the world turn in awestruck appreciation and deference—it will always fall short of this mark as long as it is ruled by the CCP. China will never, in other words, create a Sinocentric order based upon genuine respect, appreciation, and affinity as long as the country is ruled by a corrupt oligarchy that governs for its own benefit and without electoral accountability to the Chinese people, enriches itself, crushes dissent, and brutalizes the country's own minority populations.

Countering Russian narratives, however, may be more difficult, not only because of the velocity and volume of Moscow's disinformation, but also because the Kremlin's efforts to sow informational chaos offer fewer conceptual leverage points. The problem goes beyond merely the "whack-a-mole" challenges of doing fact-checking or "debunking" in a torrent of virally-propagating disinformation.

We need to help everyone learn how to be better at information hygiene. In other words, rather than putting our faith in third parties to do fact-checking for us, we may have to learn to be smarter about ingesting information ourselves. To be sure, such information-hygienic self-improvement asks a lot of those who are targeted by deliberately overwhelming, confusing, and divisive Russian (or other) disinformation content, and if there are answers here to our information confrontation challenges, they are likely to be frustratingly slow, and only gradualist in arriving. But that makes them no less essential.

We must also remember that there is more to the problem of contemporary information confrontation—and our society’s vulnerability to Chinese and Russian propaganda and disinformation—than simply our failure to correct sloppy information hygiene. For real disinformation resilience, we also need to address some more fundamental challenges in our intellectual and political culture.

The Russians, after all, did not create present-day America’s loss of confidence in itself, its cooperation-inhibiting polarization, or its tendency to distrust the idea of objective, falsifiable truth in favor of a shallowly performative ethos of unfalsifiable assertion. The Kremlin is simply taking advantage of dynamics that were underway long before the Putin regime’s embrace of nihilistic destabilization. Modern Americans tend to doubt ourselves, obsess about our sins as a society, and think those we dislike among our fellow citizens are responsible for our country’s most fundamental problems—and perhaps also those of the world more generally. Preoccupied by such reciprocal domestic antagonisms, we are remarkably unwilling to stick up for our own values or even to think that they are worth defending. This helps our adversaries immensely, whether they are trying to foist their narratives on the world or simply to encourage our own divisions and distrust of ourselves.

Information campaigning in strategic competition generally requires a clear and compelling narrative of “who” we are, “who” they are, and “why” it matters whether or not one side or the other prevails. If we lack the intellectual and moral self-confidence to advance such a narrative, or a persuasive one, we are in a losing game. Successful messaging therefore requires a solid foundation in our own conception of and belief in ourselves. If we lack such faith and self-confidence—that is, if we do not trust in our own basic rectitude—we will fail to be persuasive to others.

Introduction: The Information Challenge

It is an unwelcome truth to observe that Western democracies find themselves in an “information war” being waged against them and their societies by official propagandists and purveyors of disinformation working for foreign authoritarian regimes whose values are antithetical to our own. These techniques are used as foreign policy tools for political and strategic competitive advantage. Propaganda and disinformation tactics are certainly used by regional or local “rogue regimes” such as Iran² and North Korea,³ but the campaigns of most potential strategic significance to the United States, its allies, and its partners are those undertaken by the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Given Russia’s history of attempting to meddle in elections in the United States⁴ and Western Europe⁵ and the fierce disinformation campaigns the Kremlin has undertaken in connection with its war of aggression against Ukraine,⁶ the propaganda campaigns that have garnered the most

2 See, for example, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “USCIRF Releases New Report on Iranian Propaganda Against Religious Minorities” (July 22, 2022). <https://www.uscifr.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscifr-releases-new-report-iranian-propaganda-against-religious>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

3 See, for example, Tae-Jun Kang, “North Korea Strengthens Propaganda Efforts Ahead of Key Party Anniversary,” *The Diplomat* (October 9, 2020). <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/north-korea-strengthens-propaganda-efforts-ahead-of-key-party-anniversary/>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

4 See, for example, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Russian Interference in 2016 U.S. Elections” (undated) describing 2018 grand jury indictment of 12 Russian military intelligence officers for conspiracy against the United States in this regard. <https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/cyber/russian-interference-in-2016-u-s-elections>. Accessed November 9, 2022. See also U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, “Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election,” Report No. 116-290, 116th Congress, 2nd Session (November 10, 2020). <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/publications/report-select-committee-intelligence-united-states-senate-russian-active-measures>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

5 See, for example, Erik Brattburg and Tim Maurer, “Five European Experiences with Russian Election Interference,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2018) discussing Russian interference efforts in the Netherlands, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Sweden. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep21009.6.pdf>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

6 See, for example, U.S. Department of State, “Russia’s War on Ukraine: Six Months of Lies, Implemented” (August 24, 2022). <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/russias-war-on-ukraine-six-months-of-lies-implemented/>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

international attention are those from Russia. Russia's propaganda model has been described as a "firehose of falsehood"⁷ spewed out through a "global disinformation and propaganda ecosystem" made up of "official, proxy, and unattributed communication channels and platforms that Russia uses to create and amplify false narratives." These efforts involve:

official government communications, state-funded global messaging, cultivation of proxy sources, weaponization of social media, and cyber-enabled disinformation. The Kremlin bears direct responsibility for cultivating these tactics and platforms as part of its approach to using information as a weapon. It invests massively in its propaganda channels, its intelligence services[,] and its proxies to conduct malicious cyber activity to support their disinformation efforts, and it leverages outlets that masquerade as news sites or research institutions to spread these false and misleading narratives.⁸

For their part, the rulers of the PRC feel themselves to be in a zero-sum struggle for global "discourse power" and information dominance—an information war in which they seek to wield every lever of advantage they can against Western "discourse hegemony."⁹ As one recent RAND Corporation study summarized things,

Chinese theorists consider influence over the language, vocabulary, ideas, and concepts used to discuss international issues—known as *discourse power* [*huayu quan*]¹⁰—to be an important attribute of global power. 'Only when Chinese diplomatic discourse is generally prevalent internationally,' noted Yang Jiemian, a prominent scholar at the Shanghai

7 Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It," RAND Corporation (2016), p1. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

8 U.S. Department of State, Global Engagement Center, "Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem" (August 2020), p3. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia's-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf. Accessed November 9, 2022.

9 Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2021), p322 (quoting Chinese sources).

Institute of International Studies, “will China exert the influence and play the role of a great power.”¹⁰

Beijing feels such global propagandistic, thought-shaping “discourse control”—that is, what Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials describe as “grabbing the microphone”—to be

essential to creating a new global order centered around China. ... China’s success in building itself into a vastly stronger and more influential global power than it was in the wake of the Tiananmen Square Massacre in no way lessened the CCP’s fixation upon discourse control. Its messaging campaign ... is today taking on an increasingly *offensive* nature—aimed no longer simply at *protecting* China’s rise but at reshaping the international environment into the form that Beijing desires it to take. Such narrative warfare is felt to be essential to China’s “national rejuvenation.”¹¹

The Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns each operate in different ways, but it is increasingly appreciated that—as indeed their authors intend—they present great threats to Western democracies and to many other countries around the world. Russia’s efforts against Ukraine, it has been said, represent “just the latest reminder how dangerous for democracies disinformation and information manipulation can be.”¹² Some commentators have even suggested that our failure to respond effectively to

10 Timothy R. Heath, Derek Grossman, and Asha Clark, “China’s Quest for Primacy: An Analysis of Chinese International and Defense Strategies to Outcompete the United States,” RAND Corporation (2021), pp151-52 (quoting Yang Jiemian, “Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics and Discourse Power: Purpose and Challenges [中国特色 大国外交和话语权的使命与挑战],” *International Problems Research* [国际问题研究] (May 13, 2017). https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA400/RRA447-1/RAND_RRA447-1.pdf. Accessed November 9, 2022.

11 Christopher Ford, “China’s Strategic Vision: Part Two – Tools and Axes of Competition,” MITRE Center for Strategic Competition, *Occasional Papers* 1, no. 2 (June 27, 2022), pp12-13. <https://www.mitre.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/pr-21-02877-6-chinas-strategic-vision-part-two-tools-and-axes-of-competition.pdf>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

12 V. Jourova and T. Breton, “Fighting propaganda war with democratic methods – new anti-disinformation code,” European Commission (June 16, 2022). https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/AC_22_3791. Accessed November 9, 2022.

such challenges could imperil “the future of civil discourse and democracy, and the value of truth itself.”¹³

The stakes are clearly high, and it is becoming an increasingly urgent priority for world leaders to counter these threats. In a declaration cited by the U.S. State Department in its efforts against foreign propaganda and disinformation, for instance, President Joe Biden has said that:

There is truth and there are lies. Lies told for power and for profit. And each of us has a duty and responsibility, as citizens, as Americans, and especially as leaders—leaders who have pledged to honor our Constitution and protect our nation—to defend the truth and to defeat the lies.”¹⁴

To respond effectively, however, it is essential for U.S. leaders to understand the nature of the Russian and Chinese information campaigns and how these efforts fit into and support the grand strategies pursued by each of these two authoritarian regimes. Specifically, it is critical to the development and implementation of effective counter-strategy that we understand not merely *that* the Putin regime and the CCP disseminate falsehoods, but *why* and *for what purpose* such lies are being spread.

Russian and Chinese propaganda narratives are quite different in their nature because they support global strategies that have quite different *types* of objectives, with the result that they present correspondingly different types of information threats and call for different types of response. The following pages will explore these dynamics, looking first at the nature of PRC and Russian propaganda and disinformation efforts and then turning to some of the ways in which it may be possible to counter them.

13 “How to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News, and the Future of Conflict,” Wilson Center (undated). <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/how-lose-information-war-russia-fake-news-and-future-conflict>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

14 U.S. Department of State, Global Engagement Center, “Disarming Disinformation: Our Shared Responsibility” (August 31, 2022). <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

Chinese Narrative Earnestness

For its part, CCP propaganda tends to tell a consistent narrative about the Party and about China, and seems genuinely to want the rest of the world to *believe* that story. China advances, in other words, a storyline and intends to convince listeners that this storyline is true. This is structurally essential, for China does not wish merely to undermine the existing world order. It wants—as this author has been arguing in print for the last decade and a half¹⁵—to *restructure* the current international system into a much more Sinocentric form, in which other states depend asymmetrically upon China and defer to the CCP's wishes on matters of significance.¹⁶

A. CCP Benevolence and Inerrancy

This CCP narrative has a number of elements, beginning—perhaps most importantly—with the Party's own self-aggrandizing story of itself. In this account, the CCP depicts itself as being as unerringly benevolent and omniscient, as Chinese imperial dynasties have for thousands of years *essentially* always asserted themselves to be when defending their possession of the “Mandate of Heaven” that is felt to entitle them to rule. As this author has written elsewhere, this conception

invoke[s] images drawn from centuries of imperial rule in which the political elite—the caste of bureaucrats who administered the realm for the emperor and in his name—was drawn in large part from a scholarly literati credentialed through a competitive examination process that tested their absorption of a canon of classical texts. The CCP [has] worked hard to depict itself as

15 See Christopher Ford, “The Past as Prism: China and the Shock of Plural Sovereignty,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 47 (4th Quarter 2007), p14. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA521057.pdf>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

16 See generally, for example, Christopher A. Ford, “China’s Strategic Vision: Part Three – Envisioning a Sinocentric World,” MITRE Corporation Center for Strategic Competition, Occasional Papers 1, no. 3 (June 27, 2022). <https://www.mitre.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/pr-21-02877-7-chinas-strategic-vision-envisioning-a-sinocentric-world.pdf>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

governing in the mold of ... in effect, a reconstituted imperial bureaucracy without an actual emperor: rule by an oligarchic elite selected on a meritocratic basis that had itself been reworked to abandon memorization of the classical Confucian canon in favor of a professional curriculum tailored to modern technocratic and administrative needs. The Party's official narrative of itself[,] ... a vision in which the Party as a whole might be said to have stepped into the shoes of the infallible and all-wise Son of Heaven[,] ... is based in large part upon the claim that progress up through the ranks of the Party bureaucracy is a sign of ever-greater competence and virtue, equipping the most successful climbers of its professional ladder to serve, albeit temporarily, as personifications of the political virtue around which this new, quasi-Confucian legitimacy narrative revolved. ...[B]y the early years of the twenty-first century, the ideal of meritocratic governance had clearly become a critical component of the CCP story.¹⁷

This salutary elite—which, precisely because of its benevolence and competence, supposedly *deserves and has the right to rule* without the disorderly and uncertain interposition of democratic electoral choice—is said to be the key to China enjoying stability and prosperity indefinitely.

B. Nothing Is Their Fault

In this account, of course, none of the problems afflicting China are allowed to be seen as the CCP's fault, for that might call the Party's benevolence, inerrancy, and omnicompetence into question in ways that could undermine its Mandate of Heaven. Rather, the Party depicts its domestic challenges as being the result of malevolent forces of Western subversion and their domestic proxies and puppets—the same forces that have conspired since the mid-19th century to keep China weak, divided, and subservient.

In this narrative, for instance, the desire of people in Hong Kong to continue having some role in choosing their own rulers is the result of

¹⁷ Christopher Ford, *China Looks at the West: Global Ambitions, and the Future of Sino-American Relations* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), pp298, 302, 304.

“infiltration and sabotage activities.”¹⁸ In Xi Jinping’s mind, China is beset by malevolent forces organized abroad that are working to foment a “color revolution” against the CCP; against these forces, Xi claims the need to build an ever more elaborate and repressive domestic security apparatus.¹⁹

Indeed, *any* outside ideas or concepts over which the CCP cannot exert control are depicted as grave threats to Chinese harmony. (It is claimed, for instance, that foreign forces “use [computer] networks to interfere in the internal political affairs of other countries, to attack other countries’ political systems, incite social unrest [and] subvert other countries’ regimes.”²⁰ Moreover, “[a]nti-China forces in the West” are supposedly “trying to continue to influence China’s social stability and even subvert our country’s political power through Christianity.”²¹) Critically, however, such threats must always be depicted as coming from *outside*, or at least from malign domestic actors inspired by or in league with such outside forces. Chinese unhappiness with CCP rule cannot be admitted to have anything whatsoever to do with CCP rule.

C. A Model of “Harmony”

In the CCP’s telling, such outside threats are particularly pernicious because of the risk they pose to the “harmony” that is said to characterize one-party CCP rule. For the last two decades, Chinese propaganda narratives have stressed the centrality of continued CCP rule as the secret to ensuring a “harmonious” society. An example:

In 2003, CCP officials began to refer to the importance of building a harmonious society (*hexie shehui*), and in 2004 this

18 Kelvin Chan and Christopher Bodeen, “China’s Xi: No tolerance for subversion in Hong Kong,” AP (July 1, 2017) (quoting Xi Jinping). <https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-international-news-hong-kong-china-xi-jinping-137ad4753f714833a1a9d43d3fdb078>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

19 Chris Buckley and Stephen Lee Meyers, “In Turbulent Times, Xi Builds a Security Fortress for China, and Himself,” *New York Times* (August 6, 2022). <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/06/world/asia/xi-jinping-china-security.html>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

20 “China Warns of ‘Foreign Powers’ Subverting Communist Party Rule Online,” Radio Free Asia (December 28, 2016). <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/warns-12282016122008.html>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

21 Ben Blanchard, “China official says West using Christianity to ‘subvert’ power,” Reuters (March 11, 2019) (quoting Xu Xiaohong, head of the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China). <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-parliament-religion/china-official-says-west-using-christianity-to-subvert-power-idUSKBN1QT03C>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

formulation received the endorsement of the Fourth Plenum of the Sixteenth Central Committee—which incorporated “the construction of a harmonious socialist society” as a strategic objective of China’s social development program. ... By 2006, in fact, the harmonious society campaign had moved up to the very top of the Party’s declared agenda, signaling that “the construction of a harmonious socialist society” had become “the most important strategic objective in China today.” Hu Jintao [was] particularly known for his promotion of this idea, repeatedly referring to the importance of “building a harmonious society.”²²

In fact, the CCP has come to promote its concept of an authoritarian “harmonious society” not just as a model for China, but as one that should be exported to the rest of the world. Under President Hu Jintao, Chinese officials began to promote the idea of a “harmonious world” expressly modeled on the “harmonious society” the CCP claimed to be building in China itself.²³ President Xi Jinping uses slightly different phrasing, but the point is the same. Under his rule, officials promise a global “community of shared future for human beings”²⁴ that will constitute “a new type

22 Ford, *China Looks at the West*, *supra*, p308 (citing Yu Keping, *Democracy is a Good Thing: Essays on Politics, Society, and Culture in Contemporary China* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2009), p169; Valérie Niquet, “Confu-talk’: The use of Confucian concepts in contemporary Chinese foreign policy,” in *China’s Thought Management* (Anne-Marie Brady, ed.) (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), pp76, 81; Anne-Marie Brady, “State Confucianism, Chineseness, and tradition in CCP propaganda,” in *China’s Thought Management* (Anne-Marie Brady, ed.) (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), pp57, 66; Hu Jintao, Report to the Seventeenth Party Congress (October 15, 2007). http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-10/24/content_6938749.htm. Accessed November 9, 2022. See also Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), p59 (quoting similar Hu comments from 2005).

23 Ford, *China Looks at the West*, *supra*, pp428-40.

24 “Full text of ‘Beijing Declaration’ adopted by the First South-South Human Rights Forum,” *China Daily* (December 8, 2017) [hereinafter “Beijing Declaration”]. <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201712/08/WS5a2aaa68a310eefe3e99ef85.html>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

of international relations.”²⁵ China offers its own one-party model of authoritarian governance as “a new option to the international community.”²⁶

D. “Human Rights” Mean Only What We Say They Do

Chinese propaganda narratives do not depict this vision of globally exporting the CCP’s model of governance as being challenged or tarnished by worries about human rights or democratic accountability of rulers to those whom they rule, for Party propagandists *redefine* “human rights” and “democracy” to make them compatible with CCP authoritarianism. Chinese officials, for instance, profess a relativistic view of human rights, arguing that every country should be held accountable only to “its own” interpretation of such rights—which in China’s case, of course, means the CCP’s view.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, for instance, has referred to China’s as a “path of human rights development with Chinese characteristics”²⁷ in which the government is allowed to “balance” human rights with factors such as economic development and “the context of [countries’] history, cultural, and religious backgrounds.” In effect, therefore, this term can mean whatever China’s ruling elite wants it to mean. As one recent study by the Asia Society notes, “[i]n this reframed definition of human rights, the state serves as the arbiter of both the nation’s collective interests and the individual’s rights,” so that “a totalitarian government could assert absolute rights over its internal affairs and claim to be safeguarding human rights so long as its domestic economy grows.”²⁸ There is no coincidence here.

25 Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, remarks to the 19th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party” (October 18, 2017) [hereinafter “Xi, ‘Secure a Decisive Victory’”], Xinhua News Agency (November 4 2017). https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpconationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm. Accessed November 9, 2022.

26 State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “China and the World in the New Era” (September 27, 2019). https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201909/27/content_WS5d8d80f9c6d0bcf8c4c142ef.html. Accessed November 9, 2022.

27 Quoted by Charlotte Gao, “China Promotes Human Rights ‘With Chinese Characteristics,’” *The Diplomat* (December 12, 2017). <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/china-promotes-human-rights-with-chinese-characteristics/>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

28 Dale R. Russell and Blake H. Berger, “Stacking the Deck: China’s Influence in International Technology Standards Setting,” Asia Society Policy Institute (2021), pp14-15. Accessed November 9, 2022. https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/ASPI_StacktheDeckreport_final.pdf.

E. One-Party Rule is “Democracy”

In its promotion of its own narratives of political and civilizational supremacy, CCP propaganda also advances a similarly Orwellian redefinition of “democracy.” In this depiction, rather than letting the people decide who ruled them, the idea is simply—as Hu Jintao put it in 2007—to “guarantee the people’s rights to be informed, to participate, to be heard, and to oversee.”²⁹ More recently, CCP officials have doubled down on such claims, declaring that China has “a democracy that works,” in the form of what the State Council Information Office (SCIO) now calls an idea of “whole-process people’s democracy,” which revolves around “democratic consultation.”³⁰

Not surprisingly, there is little of any actual “democracy” in this proclaimed ethic of “democratic consultation.” Under this concept, rule in China is “democratic” simply in that—like any good Imperial “Son of Heaven” in ancient times—the Party claims to listen closely to and consider the needs of the people before deciding what to do. Continued Party control is unquestioned, and indeed CCP rule is described as “the fundamental guarantee for whole-process people’s democracy.” The CCP must always remain “the governing party, and the other parties [must] accept its leadership.” (At best, other groups in society function merely as “its advisors and assistants.”) According to the SCIO, therefore, the *true* meaning of democracy is not “One Person, One Vote,” but instead merely that “the public can express their requirements” while “the governing party” remains “in charge of state affairs.”³¹

In conjunction with this effort to redefine “democracy” to mean unchecked CCP rule in which no one can question the Party’s authority and all must follow its guidance or be guilty of a treasonous subversion of national “harmony,” Chinese propaganda narratives also invest heavily in denigrating “Western” conceptions of what democracy means. In 2021, for instance, Chinese propaganda organs lambasted “deficiencies and abuse of democracy in the U.S.,” attacking America as a so-called “‘beacon of democracy’ [that actually] has nothing worth showing off given the chaotic

29 Hu Jintao, Report to the Seventeenth Party Congress (October 15, 2007). http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-10/24/content_6938749.htm. Accessed November 9, 2022.

30 State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “China: Democracy That Works” (December 4, 2021) [hereinafter “SCIO, ‘Democracy That Works’”]. http://www.news.cn/english/2021-12/04/c_1310351231.htm. Accessed November 9, 2022.

31 *Id.*

American society.”³² America, the State Council Information Office proclaimed, was “no true democracy,”³³ and Chinese propagandists promoted the idea that whereas “China enjoys order and prosperity thanks to one-party rule ... American-style democracy brings only chaos, dysfunction[,] and decline.”³⁴

F. The CCP’s “Replacement Narrative”

In informational terms, in other words, one might say that Beijing’s disinformation and propaganda campaigning advances a *replacement narrative* for postwar international norms of liberal democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. And indeed this *has to be* a “replacement” narrative, because China seeks a new global order constructed around itself—a Sinocentric “community of shared destiny” which Xi Jinping depicts as a “new type of international relations” guided by ancient “Chinese wisdom and strength.” This alternative world-system aspires to compete with, and ultimately to supplant, Western ideas of juridically coequal sovereignties, contractual international law, and human rights, by offering its own vision of a “‘harmonious’ and vertically constituted system of social order centered on China as the civilizational and politico-moral leader and norm-setter for the system.”³⁵

Such a *replacement narrative* must perforce malign the existing order and its leaders, and promote itself as a better one that will operate on more just principles and under more benevolent global management—and this is just what CCP messaging themes do. To summarize this alternative Chinese narrative, therefore:

- The CCP’s leaders are (like romanticized Confucian emperors of old) benevolent, omniscient, and incapable of error;
- CCP-ruled China is thus a model of “harmonious” order and prosperity;

32 Quoted by Vincent Ni, “China Attacks ‘US-style democracy’ prior to Biden Summit,” *The Guardian* (December 6 2021). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/06/china-attacks-us-style-democracy-prior-to-biden-summit>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

33 SCIO, “Democracy That Works,” *supra*.

34 “China hopes to flaunt the merits of its political system over America’s,” *The Economist* (November 8, 2021 [updated December 7, 2021]). <https://www.economist.com/the-world-ahead/2021/11/08/china-hopes-to-flaunt-the-merits-of-its-political-system-over-americas>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

35 Ford, “China’s Strategic Vision: Part Three,” *supra*, p21.

- Any *problems* in China are the result of malevolent foreign forces that conspire with domestic agents of disloyalty and disorder to prevent the Chinese people from fulfilling their destiny;
- There are no universal standards of for human rights, with such notions having only the meaning that individual governments wish to give them; and
- Western liberal democracy is a fraud, for which the CCP has developed its own, *superior* alternative concept of “democracy”—which it offers to the world as a model for “harmony” everywhere.

It is essential to this narrative that Western democracy be seen as unattractive and dysfunctional, and *China’s* approach to international order seen as more just and beneficial to all concerned than the one that has generally prevailed since the Second World War.

Crucially, however, none of this works unless listeners actually *buy the story*. The Chinese narrative, therefore, requires that there actually be something called “truth.” The CCP wants us to reject what we have hitherto understood to be true and to have value, and to believe, instead, *China’s* version of the world. This is a distinctive structural difference between Chinese and Russian propaganda, for—as we will see—the Russian approach has no desire to replace the narratives of the current international order with its own version.

Russian Narratives: Nationalism and Nihilism

So what can one say, by way of comparison, about Russian propaganda in the era of Vladimir Putin? One thing to remember is the fundamental *bifurcation* of the thrust of Russian narratives. Within Russia itself, the Putin regime *does* push a real replacement narrative, of a sort. Internationally, however, it promotes what might more accurately be termed a “wrecker’s narrative”—one that aims not to cement in place an alternative vision, but rather to destabilize *all* such visions.

A. Domestic Replacement Narrative

Domestically, the Putin regime promotes increasingly neo-tsarist or even fascist concepts of “blood and soil” ultranationalism, conservative social and religious mores, and authoritarian reaction. It seeks to cement this vision in the Russian consciousness, to replace both the old Marxist-Leninist dogma of Soviet days and the incipient pro-Western liberalism of the post-Cold War 1990s.

As Gregory Carleton has noted, the “myth of exceptionalism” in the Russian regime’s narrative of Russia revolves today around the idea—carefully nurtured by regime spin doctors—that no other nation “has faced such a persistent wave of challenges and threats for century upon century,” forcing it repeatedly to play “a salvational role” through hideous sacrifice, defiant resistance, and stoic martyrdom against endless waves of foreign enemies determined to subjugate and humiliate it.³⁶ This is a narrative in which the government of President Vladimir Putin has invested heavily.

The Putin regime also wishes everyone to accept the “Russian Idea”—the notion that “Russia is a unique civilization, in many ways superior to the West, and is both European and Eurasian.” In this vision, moreover, “Western concepts of individualism, competition, and untrammelled free

36 Gregory Carleton, *Russia: The Story of War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2017), pp8, 10, 19. See also Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2015), p77.

expression are alien to the more holistic, organic, communal Russian values.”³⁷

Particularly after flagrant electoral fraud produced widespread popular protest in the wake of the 2011 parliamentary elections and Putin’s own re-election to the presidency in 2012, official excoriation of Western threats has been significantly stepped up. Since then, there has been increasing emphasis upon the ideological or spiritual corruption said to be presented by liberal democratic ideals, foreign nongovernmental organizations, advocates of gay rights, and other concepts said to represent Western civilization.

The other part of Putin’s domestic narrative asserts linkages between the outside threats presented by malevolent Western forces trying to subvert and destroy Russia and those *within* the country who have the temerity to disagree with Putin—or, more specifically, the effrontery to suggest that Russians should be offered choices *other* than his regime. This narrative has painted a disturbingly dark, dehumanizing narrative of his domestic opposition. Describing opposition political forces as a “fifth column” in league with foreign saboteurs, he has depicted them as an unnatural and infectious bacterium of which Mother Russia must be cleansed: “some sort of bacilli that infect the organisms of society or the state” and lead to “retrogression, barbarism, and much blood.”³⁸ After returning to the presidency in the 2012 election, Putin crowed that his victory demonstrates that “our people can distinguish between the desire for renewal and a political provocation that has only one goal: To destroy Russian statehood and usurp power.”³⁹

The high point of this mix of anti-foreign vitriol and authoritarian denunciations of corrupting Western values, at least so far, has been Putin’s September 2022 speech announcing the supposed annexation of those (shrinking) areas of Ukraine his forces then occupied as a result of Russia’s brutal invasion beginning in February of that year. In this remarkable screed—a conceptual salad of tropes that could have been drawn in equal parts from Franz Fanon, Benito Mussolini, Che Guevara, Noam Chomsky,

37 Angela E. Stent, *Putin’s World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest* (New York: Hachette, 2019), p37.

38 Hill and Gaddy, *supra*, pp241, 254, 256.

39 Anne Applebaum, “Putinism: The Ideology,” *Strategic Update* 13.2, London School of Economics (February 2013), p3.

Anita Bryant, and the wild conspiracy theorists of QAnon—the Russian president set forth perhaps more clearly than ever before his narrative of angry grievance.

In those remarks, Putin first invoked “those who from the origins of Ancient Russia for centuries created and defended Russia,” and upon whose rocks “claims to world domination in the past have been shattered more than once by the courage and the steadfastness of our people.” Then he called upon Ukrainians—against whom Putin’s forces were at that very moment continuing to commit war crimes—to “return to their true, historical Fatherland.” He also decried the “collapse [of] the USSR,” which he said “tore apart, dismembered our people’s community, [and] turned it into a national catastrophe.” He devoted much of his speech, however, to a diatribe against the West. Western elites, Putin said, ran a

neo-colonial system that allows it to parasitize, in fact, plunder the world at the expense of the power of the dollar and technological dictates, collect real tribute from humanity, extract the main source of unearned prosperity, the rent of the hegemon ... [under which] all countries surrender their sovereignty to the United States. ... They do not wish us freedom, but they want to see us as a colony. They want not equal cooperation, but robbery. They want to see us not as a free society, but as a crowd of soulless slaves. ...

They brazenly divide the world into their vassals, into the so-called civilized countries and into all the rest, who, according to the plan of today’s Western racists, should join the list of barbarians and savages. False labels—“rogue country,” “authoritarian regime”—are already ready, they stigmatize entire peoples and states, and there is nothing new in this. There is nothing new in this: the Western elites are what they were, and have remained so—colonialist. They discriminate, divide peoples into the first and other grades.

We have never accepted and will never accept such political nationalism and racism. And what, if not racism, is Russophobia, which is now spreading all over the world? What,

if not racism, is the peremptory conviction of the West that its civilization, neoliberal culture is an indisputable model for the whole world? ...

It is worth reminding the West that it began its colonial policy back in the Middle Ages, and then followed the global slave trade, the genocide of Indian tribes in America, the plunder of India, Africa, the wars of England and France against China, as a result of which it was forced to open its ports for trade [in] opium. What they did was put entire nations on drugs, purposefully exterminated entire ethnic groups for the sake of land and resources, staged a real hunt for people like animals. This is contrary to the very nature of man, truth, freedom[,] and justice.

... [T]he undisguised malice of these Western elites toward Russia is precisely that we did not allow ourselves to be robbed during the period of colonial conquests ... Western countries have been repeating for centuries that they bring freedom and democracy to other peoples. Everything is exactly the opposite: instead of democracy—suppression and exploitation; instead of freedom—enslavement and violence. The entire unipolar world order is inherently anti-democratic and not free, it is deceitful and hypocritical through and through.⁴⁰

Nor did Putin neglect to attack the cultural contamination that he said was represented by Western liberal mores—a civilizational contagion of pro-homosexual corruption and “Satanism” that was offensive to traditional mores, but that he claimed “the ruling circles of the so-called West” were nonetheless “preparing for all mankind.”

... [D]o we want to have, here, in our country, in Russia, instead of mom and dad there was ‘parent number one,’ ‘number two,’ ‘number three’—are they completely crazy already there? Do we

40 Vladimir Putin, speech (September 30, 2022). <https://strategic-culture.org/news/2022/09/30/text-putin-speech-blasting-neo-colonial/>. Accessed November 10, 2022.

really want perversions that lead to degradation and extinction to be imposed on children in our schools from the primary grades? To be drummed into them that there are supposedly other genders besides women and men, and to be offered a sex change operation? Do we want all this for our country and our children? For us, all this is unacceptable, we have a different, our own future.

I repeat, the dictatorship of the Western elites is directed against all societies, including the peoples of the Western countries themselves. This is a challenge for everyone. Such a complete denial of man, the overthrow of faith and traditional values, the suppression of freedom acquires the features of a ‘reverse religion’—outright Satanism.⁴¹

Putin concluded his speech by quoting the writings of Ivan Alexandrovich Ilyin, a White Russian emigre writer and intellectual in the early 20th century who saw Russia’s salvation lying in Christianized fascism. Ilyin, Putin said, was “a true patriot,” behind whose words “is a great spiritual choice, which for more than a thousand years of Russian statehood was followed by many generations of our ancestors.”⁴²

Though Putin’s September 2022 speech does so more authoritatively, and nearly as succinctly, this author has summarized Putin’s *domestic narrative* as follows:

... Russia has developed its own “myth of exceptionalism” that revolves around the idea of a recurring “salvational role” in the international community won through defiant resistance and stoic martyrdom against endless waves of foreign enemies determined to subjugate and humiliate it. ... In this conception, Russia is a distinct civilization having a unique essence and spirit that is constantly under threat from evil foreign forces, both physically and ideologically. These are threats against which Russians must always be vigilant, and in response to

41 *Id.*

42 *Id.*

which it is necessary to organize politics along authoritarian lines not accountable to democratic or legal check. The current regime has also entered into a close and mutually-supportive symbiosis with the Russian Orthodox Church in trying to weave a fabric of state-centered, authoritarian, patriotic nationalism that draws upon Orthodox mysticism and spirituality.

This narrative involves, and indeed requires, finger-pointing at alleged outside threats. It also asserts linkages between those outside threats and those within Russia who have the temerity to disagree with Putin Putin's narrative has come to paint a disturbingly dark, dehumanizing narrative of his domestic opposition, which he describes as a "fifth column" in league with foreign saboteurs and an unnatural and infectious bacterium of which Mother Russia must be cleansed.⁴³

B. An International Wrecker's Narrative

The reader will notice, however, that Putin's domestic narrative has relatively little *external* content, at least in comparison with CCP narratives offering the Party's authoritarian concepts of "harmonious" authoritarian order as a model for all humanity. There is, of course, a pronounced emphasis in Putin's vision upon muscular self-assertion *by* Russia to protect itself against the evil forces of Western liberal corruption—a "dark and somewhat paranoid vision of the world [that] is also powerfully bound up with a sort of imperial nostalgia, a longing for the status and sense of historical self-importance that Russia felt during the tsarist period and during its decades of Soviet global reach" and an inclination to "exert its influence widely abroad" in order to "reclaim its birthright of great power status."⁴⁴ Putin offers a grimly clear vision of how Russia *itself* should be—namely, a muscularly nationalist authoritarian fairyland of neo-tsarist Russian Orthodox conservatism, chauvinism, and political reaction—but except for a constant theme of assertion *against* the outside world, Putin's domestic narrative speaks little *about* that outside world or its future.

43 Assistant Secretary of State Christopher A. Ford, "Ideological 'Grievance States' and Nonproliferation: Russia, China, and Iran," remarks at the Institute for National Security Studies (Tel Aviv) (November 12, 2019). <https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/p2442>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

44 *Id.*

This does not mean, however, that modern Russian propaganda has no international narrative. It merely means that the narrative warfare the Kremlin directs abroad is not about *replacing* the normative framework of Western modernity with a new one but rather simply about *destabilizing* everyone else's storylines, and arguably even about undermining the very *idea* of truth and falsifiable evidentiary argumentation. Let us explore this further.

It is not merely that Russian propaganda is “not committed to consistency,” that its “different channels or representatives show no fear of ‘changing their tune,’”⁴⁵ and that Moscow's approach “does not require harmonization among the different pillars.”⁴⁶ (When a Russian strike hit a maternity hospital in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol in March 2022, for instance, Russian officials *both* denied attacking the hospital *and* defended the strike as having been carried out against a legitimate military target.⁴⁷) In fact, “[c]ontemporary Russian propaganda makes little or no commitment to the truth” in the first place—or perhaps indeed even to the idea that there is anything that is actually true—and it displays “a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions.”⁴⁸

Much of the cacophony that seems to result from this propaganda is conducive to Russia's pursuit of tactical information advantage. Lacking any felt need for “uniformity of messages among different sources,” for instance, Russia

has operationalized the concept of perpetual adversarial competition in the information environment by encouraging the development of a disinformation and propaganda ecosystem that allows for varied and overlapping approaches that reinforce

45 Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It,” RAND Corporation (2016), pp7-8. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

46 U.S. Department of State, Global Engagement Center, “Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem” (August 2020) [hereinafter “GEC, ‘Pillars of Russia's Disinformation’”], p6. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia's-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf. Accessed November 9, 2022.

47 See Carly Olson, “Russia strikes another hospital in Ukraine, killing at least one,” *New York Times* (October 3, 2022). <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/10/03/world/russia-ukraine-war-news>.

48 Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It,” RAND Corporation (2016), pp1, 5. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

each other even when individual messages within the system appear contradictory. ... [This] allows for the introduction of numerous variations of the same false narratives. This allows for the different pillars of the ecosystem to fine tune their disinformation narratives to suit different target audiences because there is no need for consistency, as there would be with attributed government communications.⁴⁹

This lack of interest in consistency also allows Russian propaganda to be nimble:

Due to their lack of commitment to objective reality ... Russian propagandists do not need to wait to check facts or verify claims; they just disseminate an interpretation of emergent events that appears to best favor their themes and objectives. This allows them to be remarkably responsive and nimble, often broadcasting the first “news” of events (and, with similar frequency, the first news of nonevents, or things that have not actually happened).⁵⁰

With such factually-unmoored flexibility can also come “the agility to be first, which affords propagandists the opportunity to create the first impression.”⁵¹

It is also possible that Russian propagandists are able to offset “[p]otential losses in credibility due to inconsistency” by other advantages rooted in the behavioral psychology of influence. “[T]he presentation of multiple arguments by multiple sources,” for example, can sometimes be “more persuasive than either the presentation of multiple arguments by one source or the presentation of one argument by multiple sources.” This may make Russia’s high-volume, multichannel “firehose of falsehood” approach more effective, “especially if those sources contain different arguments that point to the same conclusion.”⁵²

49 GEC, “Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation,” *supra*, p5.

50 Paul and Matthews, *supra*, p4.

51 *Id.*

52 *Id.* pp2-4, 8.

Nevertheless, the emphatic refusal of Russian propaganda to cleave to any consistent and intelligible version of purported objective truth is striking in ways that suggest this is more than simply tactical. What consistency and internal coherence there is in Russia's external propaganda narratives is merely *emotive* rather than factual. Their *mood* and *tone* are those of relentlessly and poisonously embittered disgust with and opposition to Western liberal internationalist mores, but Russia's outward-facing propagandists are unconcerned with giving the world any single overarching narrative in which to believe; they remain supremely disinterested in telling any kind of overall story.

Indeed, they seem almost to wear this disinterest on their sleeve. After all, the swirling array of disparate—and sometimes all but insane—ideas advanced through Russian propaganda outlets such as the *NewsFront*, *SouthFront*, *Geopolitica.ru*, and *Katehon* is almost dizzying. On such websites, for instance, one might be told that the United States created the COVID-19 virus and genetically-selective pathogens as biological weapons and tested them in Ukraine and China; France created the COVID-19 virus; Ukraine is a colony of the International Monetary Fund and run by George Soros and the Central Intelligence Agency; and COVID-19 vaccines are a fraud, or are dangerous, and there is no pandemic anyway. Alternatively, it might be said that NATO is spreading COVID in the European Union; Bill Gates (who also created the Zika virus) is using the pandemic to implant microchips in the “whole of humanity,” while national pandemic control measures are being used to bring about “end of liberal democracies and the establishments [sic] of dictatorships throughout the world” that will be “harsher than Nazi and Soviet concentration camps.” Or one might read that Sweden's feminist government refuses to investigate rapes committed by immigrants; Pope Francis is a servant of George Soros and the “global Zionist conspiracy”; the Rothschilds are a “crime family” made up of Satanists and Zionists who control the Western mainstream media; the notorious tsarist-era monastic Svengali figure of Grigori Rasputin was killed by the “Anglo-Zionist empire;” and the fire in 2019 at the French cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris was the result of a Satanic ritual.⁵³

53 These are all real stories, documented by the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center. See GEC, “Pillars of Russia's Disinformation,” *supra*, pp32-33, 45, 53, 58-59.

This cacophony, however, is every bit as structural, and as tied to the nature of Russia's grand strategy, as is the CCP's self-consistent meta-narrative of well-deserved Sinocentric inevitability. The distinctively smirking, scattershot quality of Russia's foreign propaganda and disinformation campaign—in which various regime mouthpieces and proxies simultaneously advance multiple factually-unmoored, internally inconsistent, and mutually contradictory storylines with an almost gleeful abandon—does have an overall objective. That objective, however, is not so much to advance an overall *alternative* truth that is truly persuasive, but rather just to undermine the very *possibility* of such truth. This isn't a *replacement narrative*, in other words, but rather a *wrecker's narrative*.

Just as the CCP's proffered replacement narrative is quite consistent with—and indeed essential to—China's grandiose dreams of Sinocentric global order, so also is Kremlin propaganda tailored to its geopolitical objectives. Russia does not seem to want to dominate and generally steer the entire future world-system, to persuade others of its rectitude, or to entice the rest of humanity to defer reflexively to its preferences out of respect for and agreement with Kremlin wisdom. Instead, Moscow wants mainly to feel powerful and important, to frighten and intimidate its neighbors, and to carve out strategic space in which the Putin regime can consolidate a kleptocratic empire behind a buffer zone of brutalized subject states.

And this objective entails a different—and in some ways more modest—set of “information warfare” objectives. To achieve *its* geopolitical goals, Russia need only undermine the rest of the world's willingness to try to pressure Moscow to behave or hold it accountable for its misbehavior. To this end, the Kremlin seeks to *break everyone else's narratives* and divide them against each other, apparently on the theory that the collapse of Western value-hegemony—and of the West's willingness to defend its own values in the world—will leave the Putin regime sufficient space in which to do what it pleases.⁵⁴

This is why Russian propaganda and disinformation front operations so often involve “find[ing] obscure Western fringe thinkers and conspiracy theorists and giv[ing] their typically virulent anti-Western and anti-U.S. views

54 See, for example, GEC, “Pillars of Russia's Disinformation,” *supra*, p51 (describing the “multipolar world” championed by one Russian propaganda website as one in which “Russia dominates its neighbors: divides Georgia; annexes Ukraine, Finland, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece” and also “gives away” Azerbaijan” in a deal with Iran).

a broad international platform.”⁵⁵ The intention is not really *persuading* the average foreigner coming across such outlandish gibberish, but rather “entertain[ing], confus[ing], and overwhelm[ing] the audience.”⁵⁶ Such wild-eyed voices are advanced less to be factually *compelling* than simply to be *divisive*.⁵⁷

A typical Russian disinformation operation thus works by “instigating antagonism and aggression among [social media or website] users, dividing the society ... creating political polarization and ... spread[ing] anti-Western, pro-Russian messages.”⁵⁸ Such efforts are “designed to interfere with internal ... discussions and polarize people’s views, distort topics, and escalate public debates,” and thereby to “create confusion and then exploit it” so as to “fracture democratic unity and to destabilize societies.”⁵⁹

Ultimately, these efforts seek “to destabilize and weaken Western institutions.”⁶⁰ In this respect, they share objectives articulated perhaps most boldly by the right-wing Russian intellectual Alexander Dugin in his 1997 book *Foundations of Geopolitics*—and pursued by the Dugin-affiliated website Geopolitica.ru, which describes Russia’s actions as “weakening and eventually destroying the Western liberal world order that it posits as an enemy.” Dugin advocates what he calls a “program of subversion, destabilization, and disinformation” to

introduce geopolitical disorder into internal American activity, encouraging all kinds of separatism and ethnic, social and racial conflicts, actively supporting all dissident movements—

55 *Id.*, p15; see also *id.*, p21.

56 Paul and Matthews, *supra*, p1.

57 *Cf.* GEC, “Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation,” *supra*, p6 (“By simultaneously furthering multiple versions of a given story, these actors muddy the waters of the information environment in order to confuse those trying to discern the truth.”).

58 *Id.*, p34 (quoting conclusions of one Russian website’s analysis by Georgia’s International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy).

59 Timothy Thomas, “Estonia Reacts: Countering Russian Disinformation Techniques,” MITRE Corporation (January 2020), pp2, 8, 12, 14 (discussing objectives of Russian disinformation in Estonia). <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1141298.pdf>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

60 GEC, “Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation,” *supra*, p45 (discussing Geopolitica.ru).

extremist, racist, and sectarian groups, thus destabilizing internal political processes in the U.S.⁶¹

To do *this*, no overall replacement narrative of Russia-congenial international order is required, for the Kremlin's agenda for the outside world calls merely for destabilization, confusion, and division. According to Mark Galeotti, the Russian term for this approach is *infoshum*—or “info-noise,” referring to information that is intended “not so much to persuade people of one line or another as to raise a fog of falsehood, to make it seem impossible to know what is true and what is false.”⁶² Moscow's “firehose of falsehood” thus seems as well adapted for this task as the CCP's narrative of dawning global “harmony” under Beijing's benevolent guidance is for supporting China's Sinocentric global ambitions.

61 Quoted in *id.*, p50.

62 Mark Galeotti, *The Weaponization of Everything* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), p162. Galeotti contrasts this with the approach taken by China, which he describes as being “instead eager to buy positive coverage.” *Id.*, pp170-71.

Different Responses to Different Problems

What, then, are we to do in responding to the challenges presented by Chinese and Russian disinformation and propaganda? Unfortunately, one lesson that can be drawn from the foregoing analysis is that there exists no “one size fits all” solution. The strategies adopted by our two primary information warfare assailants are different enough, each from the other, as to require of us two different sorts of response.

A. Countering Chinese Narratives

1. Counter-Narratives Abroad

Answering the CCP’s narrative assault upon the concepts and values that underlie the international order that has brought such stability and prosperity to so many countries—including to China—for decades is perhaps the least challenging of the two, at least in principle. During our Cold War rivalry with Soviet communism, after all, we also faced information challenges from an adversarial regime that sought to persuade the rest of the world that our society was dysfunctional and unjust, and that *its* approach to socio-political organization represented the happy future of mankind.

In theory, therefore, we have some experience with building and advancing counter-narratives—not merely in order to promote our own values, but also to point out the ways in which our strategic adversary falls short even against the skewed standards of its *own* self-aggrandizing legitimacy narrative. Marxist claims of economic progress and justice during the Cold War, for example—and of anti-imperialist solidarity with forces of social and political revolution in the developing world—could be undermined by spreading awareness of the grim realities of life under the repressive thumb of the sclerotic bureaucrats and human rights abusers in the Kremlin, and of the tyrannical brutality of Soviet proxy regimes worldwide. Similarly, America’s own values, and the realities of life in our country notwithstanding Soviet efforts to play upon uncomfortable truths of economic inequality and an ugly history of racial injustice, could be promoted by mass media

engagement and educational and “people-to-people” programs to subvert the hideous caricatures of us promoted by Soviet propaganda.

By analogy, our answer to the CCP replacement narrative of Party rectitude and competence—and of the supposed desirability of “harmonious” global order under Chinese guidance—will need to involve systematically undercutting the CCP storyline with effective counter-narratives of our own. And such counter-narratives could be effective precisely because the CCP is not content simply with destabilizing Western-derived international norms and values. A replacement narrative fails if it cannot replace the traditional one, and Beijing both wants and *needs* the rest of the world to believe its *own* story. If we “break” that replacement narrative, the CCP loses its propaganda game.

Nor is such narrative counter-strategy something we have to implement on our own. If we do things right, we will have many partners in resisting Sinocentric accretion, in the form of the many states who share our interest in *not* becoming neo-tributary vassal states of the Middle Kingdom. And our counter-narrative could indeed be quite powerful.

In this context, we should certainly make a case for our own values of holding those in power subject to democratic accountability and ensuring that individuals enjoy rights enforceable against those who would otherwise oppress them. An effective narrative counter-strategy would also point out not merely tyranny, egregious human rights abuses, corruption, and crimes against humanity in China, but also structural flaws, weaknesses, and unsustainability in the CCP’s own approach to economic governance. Through the identification of such problems, we could help dim the luster of the “China model” as seen through the eyes of leaders and populations in the developing world who might otherwise be tempted to trade their own (and their countries’) political autonomy for a measure of accelerated economic growth and development.

But it cannot stop there. Narratives grounded in the importance of democratic, rights-based governance and against tyranny and repression are certainly essential, not only because such values *do* have transcendent human value, but also because “we” would not be “us” without a steadfast commitment to our longstanding—and imperfect but continuing—journey of trying to live up to the values that underpin democratic legitimacy. Nevertheless, *solely* promoting the resistance that democratic values must

offer to authoritarianism will not be sufficient to persuade some autocrats in the developing world to resist Chinese revisionism.

U.S. narratives focused incautiously upon efforts to meet Chinese threats in quasi-military terms may also fall short, for there are many countries in the developing world that *do* understand the dangers of CCP hegemonism, and fear it, but who will at the same time be off-put by anything that feels like we seek a Cold War-style military alliance *against* China. In many circles, the ideological waters of Cold War-era “non-alignment” still run deep. In such a context, things that “feel like” the Americans are again seeking military allies and potential co-belligerents in a bipolar struggle could be counterproductive—not merely failing to garner the support needed to undermine Beijing’s diplomatic advances, but also actually *feeding* CCP disinformation tropes that contrast supposed Western militarism with purported Chinese harmonious benevolence.

For many audiences, therefore, our strongest suit may be to point out—as this author tried to do recently in the context of U.S.-Indonesian relations⁶³—that the issue here is not fundamentally about “alliances” at all. Instead, it is about the moral imperative of protecting the political, economic, and strategic autonomy of sovereign peoples against China’s efforts to enmesh them in exploitative webs of dependency, coercion, and subjugation.

We should certainly prize our military alliances, strengthen them, and expand them where feasible. But we need not ask such alliances of everyone; we should simply seek ways to be ever-better partners with others where our interests coincide. And importantly, for many countries—perhaps even most of them—these interests *do* coincide in preventing the emergence of a new, Sinocentric imperium.

This is perhaps, for Americans, an unaccustomed narrative to advance. After all, we have been the subjects of decades of anti-American stereotyping and *ad hominem* slurs about “imperialism” or “militarism” for many years—fanned by Soviet propaganda during the Cold War, and more recently in the context of Middle Eastern interventions—that portray the United States as an archetype of neo-imperialist resistance to self-determination by the Global South. (As we have seen, such calumnies

63 See Christopher Ford, “‘Nonalignment,’ U.S.-Indonesian Security Cooperation, and Partnership to Protect Sovereign Autonomy from Chinese Coercion,” remarks at the U.S.-Indonesia Security Dialogue (Denpasar, Bali) (August 14, 2022). <https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/nonalignment-u-s-indonesian-security-cooperation-and-partnership-to-protect-sovereign-autonomy-from-chinese-coercion>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

continue as major themes in Chinese and Russian propaganda and disinformation.)

In the modern world, however, we have the chance to flip this narrative—and to champion preserving the autonomy and sovereignty of smaller and poorer countries against *Beijing's* efforts to build a network of cowed tributaries. There is no reason for us to be shy about advancing such an anti-imperialist themes against *Chinese* imperialist hegemony; moreover, these narratives have enormous benefit of being not only useful but also true.

In their campaigns to undermine international institutions and advance their own neo-imperial interests of conquest and hegemonic subjugation, the Putin and Xi regimes have invested much in propaganda narratives that draw heavily, if disingenuously, upon anti-imperialist and counterhegemonic tropes. Yet those themes and the values that underlie them are not “native” to the authoritarian and baldly imperial traditions of either Russia or China, much less the brutal regimes that rule them; in fact, they are quite the contrary.

Rather, those values are an international manifestation of the same ones that underpin democratic accountability and rights-based governance in the domestic arena: they partake of an ethical framework of liberty and autonomy. Historically speaking, to be sure, that framework grew out of Western philosophical traditions. Nevertheless, it was originally directed *against* traditional Western institutions of monarchy, aristocracy, and clerisy in world-historically progressive ways. This framework also formed the backbone of the West's belated turning against its own remnant institutions of oligarchy and slavery in domestic affairs; it has long since transcended its civilization-specific origins to become the common moral and intellectual property of humankind. (In fact, without this Western-derived values framework, Putin and Xi would have no intelligible vocabulary in which to voice—however deceitfully and opportunistically—their propagandistic critiques of supposed U.S. domination. One might say, in other words, that their attacks are the tribute their vice pays to the genuine philosophical and moral virtue of Western values.)

Despite the opportunistic propaganda coming out of Beijing and Moscow, therefore, anti-imperial and counterhegemonic values are thus part of an ethical system that is fundamentally *antithetical* to the nature and activity of the aggressively self-aggrandizing regimes of Xi and of Putin. As we develop and deploy counter-narratives designed to help prevent the CCP from enshrining its repressively Sinocentric replacement narrative at the center

of tomorrow's international order, therefore, we should, as it were, not be afraid to preach what we practice. We should do more to hold the Chinese and Russian regimes accountable to our own inherently anti-imperial value system, which seeks liberty and political autonomy for sovereign peoples. And we are likely to have partners in the developing world when we do so.

2. Counter-Narrative in China

We may, furthermore, wish to develop counter-narratives that undermine the CCP's preening and self-aggrandizing story of itself *inside China* as well. As noted earlier, some of the appeal of the Chinese narrative—both at home and abroad—lies in the claim that the CCP has found a way of governing society under a benevolent oligarchy of unerring and omniscient autocrats who can ensure social “harmony” and rapid development. This narrative, however, is vulnerable to puncture, and not merely if and when such rapid development falters.⁶⁴

The way to deflate this myth, however, is not simply to point out human rights abuses, suppression of dissent, and even genocide, even though those are all powerful points to make and they *do* tend to undermine CCP claims of social benevolence. We must also highlight the ample evidence of Party corruption, incompetence, and self-serving hunger for power—for these truths *also* undermine the CCP's legitimacy narrative and refract damningly through the lens of thousands of years of Chinese political theory in which dynasties that exhibit those discreditable characteristics forfeit the Mandate of Heaven and lose their right to rule.

We should not underestimate the power of such deflation for a regime—however Marxist it at one point *claimed* to be—that remains so powerfully grounded in pseudo-Confucian conceits of benevolence and virtue.

For centuries [in China], ever since the Zhou Dynasty overthrew the semi-legendary Shang in c. 1046 B.C.E, the core of each successive dynasty's legitimacy narrative was that it had succeeded to power—claiming for itself the so-called “Mandate of Heaven”—because of its benevolence and virtue, which was always contrasted with the axiomatic corruption and villainy

⁶⁴ The following paragraphs draw in part upon the author's previous work. See Christopher Ford, “Puncturing Beijing's Propaganda Bubble: Seven Themes,” *New Paradigms Forum* (November 20, 2015). <https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/p1993>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

shown by the previous rulers, who had thereby forfeited that Mandate.⁶⁵

In this context, evidence that the CCP is actually neither benevolent *nor* competent, *nor* the only way in which it is possible for China to achieve prosperity and status in the world, would be more than merely embarrassing. It would have potentially *existential* implications, for such evidence would tend to call into question the Party's "right" to rule China—that is, its dynastic Mandate of Heaven.

This [need to defend the CCP's *de facto* Mandate of Heaven] gives modern Chinese propaganda and [efforts to achieve] narrative control policies a special urgency, and perhaps also a special desperation. Indeed, for these reasons it may be that the CCP regime is unusually vulnerable to "narrative" challenges, for such questioning is not merely embarrassing but—by demonstrating potential divergence between the Party's legitimizing claims of virtue and its actual practice—can have existential implications. ... [T]raditional Confucian thinking sees "political failure as a form of moral failure" that could call into question a ruling dynasty's continued possession of the Mandate of Heaven.⁶⁶

An additional way to puncture the CCP's narrative of itself would be to point out that its claims to be the exclusive vehicle through which China can achieve its long dreamed-of return to geopolitical greatness are simply false. To be sure, the CCP *has* presided over economic growth, but the economic model for such growth was actually pioneered by *other* export-oriented East Asian economies—Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore, the so-called "Four Tigers" of East Asia—that certainly *didn't* labor under Communist Party oppression.

65 Christopher A. Ford, "China's Strategic Vision: Part One – The Communist Party's Strategic Framing," MITRE Center for Strategic Competition, *Occasional Papers* 1, no. 1 (June 27, 2022), p6. <https://www.mitre.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/pr-21-02877-5-chinas-strategic-vision-part-one-the-communist-partys-strategic-framing.pdf>. Accessed November 9, 2022. See also id. p22, notes pp41-42 (discussing Mandate of Heaven theory and its origins).

66 Ford, "Envisioning a Sinocentric World," *supra*, p9.

As recounted in an International Monetary Fund working paper in 1996, these decidedly non-Communist-ruled states of East Asia pioneered export-led growth and technology-focused development long before such prosperity was associated with China itself. As it noted, a number of countries in the region, including China, had enjoyed significant growth rates of between three and five percent since 1960.

This impressive achievement is, however, still modest compared with the phenomenal growth of Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan Province of China, known as the “Four Tigers” because of their powerful and intimidating economic performance. The Tigers have had annual growth rates of output per person well in excess of 6 percent. These growth rates, sustained over a 30-year period, are simply amazing.⁶⁷

The CCP frequently claims that none of China’s progress would have been possible without the Party’s enlightened leadership. According to Xi Jinping, for instance, “without the leadership of the Communist Party of China, national rejuvenation would be just wishful thinking.”⁶⁸ Yet despite this effort to depict itself as what might be called the “‘But For’ Party”⁶⁹—that is, the organization without which China would not have been able to grow and prosper—it remains a stubborn fact that the PRC’s own explosive growth was quite explicitly modeled upon approaches pioneered by these Tigers. Specifically, it began after a delegation from the PRC’s National Planning Commission and Ministry of Foreign Trade returned from a study mission to Hong Kong and Macau in 1978. This set off a chain of events that led to the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Guangdong and Fujian, thereby inaugurating a spectacular economic expansion that a full four decades of CCP rule had until that point been unable to provide.⁷⁰

67 Michael Sarel, “Growth in East Asia: What We Can and What We Cannot Infer,” International Monetary Fund (September 1996). <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/issues1/>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

68 Xi, “Secure a Decisive Victory,” *supra*.

69 Ford, “Envisioning a Sinocentric World,” *supra*, p13.

70 See, for example, Justin Yifu Lin and Jun Zhang, “China: Learning to Catch up in a Globalized World,” in *How Nations Learn: Technological Learning, Industrial Policy, and Catch-up*, Arkebe Oqubay and Kinichi Ohno, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp149-72. <https://academic.oup.com/book/32352/chapter/268612983>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

Moreover, the global market environment needed for China's growth was secured in large part through the exercise of *American* geopolitical power in *resisting* the depredations of communist regimes such as the Soviet Union and indeed China itself under Mao Zedong. China's growth and development over the last generation was also made possible at least in part by *American help and encouragement*—back when we assumed rather naively that prosperity would mellow the PRC and eventually lead it to political liberalization and geopolitical benignity. As then-Assistant Secretary of State David Stilwell observed in 2019,

... [t]h[e] international order provided by the U.S. is what allowed China and others in the region to focus on economic growth and trade and the rest. That certainly is a large part of this story ...—and to create and preserve that international order required enormous U.S. expenditures of blood, treasure, and ideas—but there's more to that story.

China was not just the indirect beneficiary of all this; U.S. support for China's development was deliberate, direct, and specific. It took many forms. In short ... we provided military and intelligence assistance, we made generous technology transfers, we ensured preferential trade and investment access, we sponsored and arranged for vast educational exchanges—and we still do—and we provided development financing and organized government-to-government capacity building, and much more.⁷¹

This does not take away from the tremendous achievements of the Chinese people during the country's period of “reform and opening” since the late 1970s. (After all, it was ultimately the people who learned and produced to such impressive effect.) But these stubborn facts certainly undermine the CCP's self-glorifying narrative that the Party *did this all by itself*, and even in the face of a hostile international environment that sought to “contain” China's rise. Those claims are simply self-serving lies.

71 Assistant Secretary of State David Stilwell, “U.S.-China Bilateral Relations: The Lessons of History,” remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (December 13, 2019). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/speech-assistant-secretary-state-east-asian-and-pacific-affairs-david-r-stilwell>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

Looking ahead, furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that if China wishes to be seen as it depicts itself—that is, as a paragon of wisdom and moral virtue to which the other countries of the world turn in awestruck appreciation and deference⁷²—it will surely always fall short of this mark as long as it is ruled by the CCP. China will never, in other words, create a Sinocentric order based upon genuine respect, appreciation, and affinity as long as it is ruled by a corrupt oligarchy that governs for its own benefit and without electoral accountability to the Chinese people, enriches itself, crushes dissent, and brutalizes the country’s own minority populations.

If it ends up being powerful enough, of course, China might conceivably still achieve something akin to a regional or global Sinocentric order through pure coercion—enforced by dint simply of its weight and might, employing a mix of bribery for the congenially cooperative and punishment for the recalcitrant. In the terms of the CCP regime’s own value discourse, however, such an approach would be fundamentally illegitimate.

Such an undeniably imperialist China would be a deep betrayal of China’s own self-proclaimed principles, providing at least a source of cognitive dissonance and perhaps even a *goad* for prickly Chinese nationalists brought up on the smug moralisms of the CCP’s “patriotic education” campaigns. A narrative of Beijing as a selfish and oppressive hegemon, detested and resisted by the world’s downtrodden and impoverished while in daily contravention of its own principles, might perhaps lead many such Chinese back to some of the ideas of the students involved in the Democracy Wall protests of 1978-79: nationalist patriots committed to China’s “return” to front-rank geopolitical status but convinced that the only way to achieve this *fully* was through the kind of political liberalization that would win the government in Beijing genuine global respect and admiration.⁷³

We may thus wish to make it part of *our* narrative that the fullest flowering of Chinese “national rejuvenation” thus depends upon political reform in China. If China really wants genuine worldwide respect, the CCP may need to go the way of the similarly authoritarian one-party regime of the Kuomintang (KMT) in Taiwan, where that formerly hegemonic party is now

72 Ford, *China Looks at the West*, *supra*, pp421-40.

73 *Id.*, p165 (citing, *inter alia*, Sun Zhe, director of the Tsinghua Center for U.S.-China Relations, interview with the author, April 24, 2012).

merely *one* of the parties competing freely and fairly for votes in a thriving and economically prosperous democracy. Though this narrative framing—which, again, has the enormous benefit of also being true—the only road to China’s genuine “return” to global glory lies through democratization and the abandonment of oligarchic tyranny.

B. Countering Russian Narratives

But what about countering the destabilization narratives promoted by Russian propagandists? Frankly, this may be harder than counter-punching with the CCP. Because it seeks to serve as a replacement narrative for Western-derived notions of liberal democratic modernity, *China’s* storyline has an internal consistency and coherence that can be “broken” by pointing out the falsehood of its grounding assumptions and architectural elements. As we have seen, however, Russia’s narrative—at least that aimed at the outside world, anyway—doesn’t seem to *need* real coherence and plausibility. If anything, it thrives on cultivating a sense of generalized distrust in *all* narratives.

The Russian narrative may thus actually be more difficult to counter. This is true not only because of the velocity and volume of Moscow’s disinformation propagation in the digital information space, but also because the Kremlin’s efforts to sow informational chaos offer fewer conceptual leverage points.

It has proudly been said that “[t]he disinformation and propaganda ecosystem that Russia continues to cultivate does not stand unopposed,” and that there now exists a “thriving counter-disinformation community comprised of governments, civil society, academia, the press, the private sector, and citizens around the world who refuse to tolerate these tactics is pushing back.”⁷⁴ The European Commission has also recently adopted a new “Code of Practice on Disinformation” intended to slow its spread through social media, such as by helping to “ensure that purveyors of disinformation do not benefit from advertising revenues,” that “signatories ... put in place stronger transparency measures, allowing users to easily recognise political ads by providing more efficient labelling,” and “that platforms ... make a more consistent use of fact-checking on their

74 GEC, “Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation,” *supra*, p4.

services.”⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the difficulty here is more formidable than many might suppose.

The problem goes beyond merely the challenges of “fact-checking” or “debunking” disinformation. Doing so is important, but merely trying to deploy accurate countervailing narratives in “whack-a-mole” exercises against torrents of virally-propagating falsehoods is likely to be inadequate. This challenge was noted, for instance, in the insightful RAND study of Russian disinformation by Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, who observed that

the very factors that make the firehose of falsehood effective also make it quite difficult to counter: For example, the high volume and multitude of channels for Russian propaganda offer proportionately limited yield if one channel is taken off the air (or offline) or if a single misleading voice is discredited. The persuasive benefits that Russian propagandists gain from presenting the first version of events (which then must be dislodged by true accounts at much greater effort) could be removed if the true accounts were instead presented first. But while credible and professional journalists are still checking their facts, the Russian firehose of falsehood is already flowing: It takes less time to make up facts than it does to verify them.⁷⁶

It is also possible that aggressive “mythbusting” could tend to spread awareness of disinformation narratives even as one attacks them.⁷⁷

This does not mean that debunking is impossible or inadvisable, for “there are some best practices available—also drawn from the field of psychology—that can and should be employed.” Retractions and refutations, for instance, will be more effective if accompanied by:

- (1) warnings at the time of initial exposure to misinformation,
- (2) repetition of the retraction or refutation, and (3) corrections

⁷⁵ European Commission, “The 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation” (June 16, 2022). <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

⁷⁶ Paul and Matthews, *supra*, p9.

⁷⁷ Galeotti, *supra*, p174.

that provide an alternative story to help fill the resulting gap in understanding when false “facts” are removed.⁷⁸

Even so, after-the-fact remedies are likely to be of only limited effectiveness; we should not place all our hopes in the fact-checkers.

A better answer might be somehow to help everyone learn how to be better at what could be called “information hygiene.”⁷⁹ Rather than putting our faith in third parties to do fact checking for us, in other words, we may have to learn to be smarter about ingesting information ourselves: to be better, more responsible consumers.

Part of this should consist, as much as possible, of *forearming* information consumers by way of *forewarning*. As Paul and Matthews note, for instance, “[f]orewarning is perhaps more effective than retractions or refutation of propaganda that has already been received.”⁸⁰ Awareness that one is being targeted—and by whom, as well as how—can do much to make someone a harder target for disinformation attack, quite apart from what precisely it is that the attacker says. (“It may be more productive,” Paul and Matthew note, “to highlight the ways in which Russian propagandists attempt to manipulate audiences, rather than fighting the specific manipulations.”⁸¹) And when indeed it is possible to identify ahead of time the specific false messages that are on their way—as, famously, with the Biden administration’s declassification and release of highly sensitive U.S. intelligence reporting in order to pre-empt and counteract planned Russian “false flag” provocations at the beginning of Russia’s 2022 assault upon Ukraine (an effort to “undermine Moscow’s propaganda and prevent Russia from defining how the war is perceived in the world”)⁸²—the effect can be more powerful still.

78 Paul and Matthews, *supra*, p9.

79 Galeotti, *supra*, p174.

80 Paul and Matthews, *supra*, p9.

81 *Id.*, p10 (emphasis added).

82 Ken Dilanian, Courtney Kube, Carol E. Lee, and Dan De Luce, “In a break with the past, U.S. is using intel to fight an info war with Russia, even when the intel isn’t rock solid,” *NBC News* (April 6, 2022) (quoting “a Western government official familiar with the strategy”). <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/us-using-declassified-intel-fight-info-war-russia-even-intel-isnt-rock-rcna23014>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

More fundamentally, however, can we acquire better information consumption *habits* that will help protect us even if we lack the good fortune of having someone “prebunk” incoming disinformation? Can we, for instance, learn to look more at the sourcing *behind* factual claims we come across, and the *reasoning* that underlies them? Can we be better at testing assertions against potential counter-arguments before we take something too seriously? Can we do better at keeping the *idea* of falsifiability alive, by keeping our eyes open for evidence that might disprove an assertion and by being suspicious of claims that seem to deny the possibility of disproof? Can we do more in demanding supporting argument and evidence from those who assert things, and in *refraining* from assertion unless we can provide it ourselves?

Additionally, can we become more aware of the cognitive biases that affect our understanding of the world? Humans, after all, do tend to skew subsequent assessments in favor of the *first* version of a storyline they encounter (anchoring bias), to infer connections and correlations between things without evidence of such relationships (apophenia), and to fixate upon things that seem to support what we already believe (confirmation bias). Can we start to habitually remind ourselves of such tendencies and to remain aware of our own inherent frailties in evaluating incoming information?

Interestingly, an effort to teach just such information hygiene habits was undertaken in Finland several years ago: “an anti-fake news initiative launched by Finland’s government in 2014 ... aimed at teaching residents, students, journalists[,] and politicians how to counter false information designed to sow division.” This program did not aim only at the fake news itself—though it did involve the promotion of more effective fact-checking efforts—but focused specially on reducing the prevalence of lazy habits of mind that might lead one to give unthinking credence *any* incoming information. According to media reports, for instance, the Finnish educational system was “reformed to emphasize critical thinking,” and then revised again in 2016 in order “to prioritize the skills students need to spot the sort of disinformation that has clouded recent election campaigns in the U.S. and across Europe.” According to one official,

What we want our students to do is ... before they like or share in the social media they think twice—who has written this?

Where has it been published? Can I find the same information from another source?”⁸³

This approach avoids the losing game of directing one’s flow of salutary counter-information “directly back at the firehose of falsehood.” Instead, it tries to “point the stream at whatever the firehose is aimed at, and tr[ies] to push that audience in more productive directions.”⁸⁴

To be sure, such information-hygienic self-improvement asks a lot of those who are targeted by deliberately overwhelming, confusing, and divisive Russian (or other) disinformation content. It is also an approach that seems likely to be difficult to scale from its original Finnish context to a polity as large as the United States. To the degree that this program is credited with indeed making Finland a harder target for Russian propaganda, however, it can at least help point us generally in a more productive direction.

Will this be enough? At this point, it is hard to offer more than a response of “I hope so.” If there are enduring answers here to our information confrontation challenges, they are likely to be frustratingly slow, and only gradualist in arriving. And they will demand a great deal of all of us in terms of individual time, effort, attention, self-awareness, and perspicacious self-restraint. But that makes them no less essential.

83 Eliza Mackintosh, “Finland is winning the war on fake news. What it’s learned may be crucial to Western democracy,” CNN (May 2019). <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/05/europe/finland-fake-news-intl/>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

84 Paul and Matthews, *supra*, p10.

Self-Confidence and Messaging Success

One factor reportedly contributing to Finland's success in these endeavors, however, should also point us to a greater truth. According to news coverage, one of the reasons given for the Finnish program's ability to help blunt Russian disinformation is its emphasis upon "developing a strong national narrative, rather than [simply] trying to debunk false claims."⁸⁵

This highlights the fact that there is more to the problem of contemporary information confrontation—and our society's vulnerability to Chinese and Russian propaganda and disinformation—than simply our failure to correct sloppy information hygiene. Much more. For real disinformation resilience, we also need to address additional fundamental challenges in our intellectual and political culture.

The destabilizations of the Russian narrative are particularly hard to counter because even before the first Kremlin internet troll put a finger to the keyboard, we were, on our own, already at least halfway to the divided, self-doubting, and fractiously paralyzed place Moscow wanted us to become. The Russians did not *create* present-day America's loss of confidence in itself, its cooperation-inhibiting polarization, or its tendency to distrust the idea of objective, falsifiable truth in favor of a shallowly performative ethos of unfalsifiable assertion.

The Kremlin is simply taking advantage of dynamics that were underway long before the Putin regime's embrace of nihilistic destabilization. We lit the fire ourselves; Putin merely brought kerosene to the party. As for Beijing, its replacement narrative is somewhat less suited to profiting from the problems of our present socio-political moment than is Moscow's narrative nihilism, but the CCP also stands to gain tremendously if we are too unsure of ourselves and too divided against each other to push back effectively against it.

In this regard, contemporary American culture works to some extent at cross purposes with U.S. national interests in resisting adversary

⁸⁵ Mackintosh, *supra*.

propaganda. To a distressing extent, modern Americans tend to doubt ourselves, obsess about our sins as a society, and think those we dislike among our fellow citizens are responsible for our country's most fundamental problems—and perhaps also those of the world more generally.

It was reported recently, for example, that polling by a professor at Johns Hopkins University shows that in the United States “almost 70 percent of people in each of the [two main] parties [are] now calling their counterparts a threat to the country and about 60 percent [are] calling them ‘evil.’”⁸⁶ According to an NBC News poll before the 2022 U.S. midterm elections, in fact, “80 percent of Democrats and Republicans believe the political opposition poses a threat that, if not stopped, will destroy America as we know it.”⁸⁷ In precisely this vein, Donald Trump has declared that “[d]espite great outside dangers from other countries, our biggest threat remains the sick, sinister[,] and evil people from within our own country.”⁸⁸ Similarly, Joe Biden describes anyone who doesn't support the key planks of his party's domestic political agenda as representing “a threat to our personal rights, to the pursuit of justice, to the rule of law, to the very soul of this country” and “to ... democracy itself.”⁸⁹

Such poisonous polarization does not seem tenable for us as a society, and at any rate does Putin's wrecker's work for him. Preoccupied by such reciprocal domestic antagonisms, we are remarkably unwilling to stick up for our own values or even to think them *worth* sticking up for. This helps our adversaries immensely, whether they are trying to foist their narratives on the world or simply to encourage our own divisions and distrust of ourselves.

86 Steve Eder, David D. Kirkpatrick, and Mike McIntire, “They Legitimized the Myth of a Stolen Election – and Reaped the Rewards,” *New York Times* (October 3, 2022). <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/03/us/politics/republican-election-objectors.html>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

87 Mark Murray, “‘Anger on their minds’: NBC News poll finds sky-high interest and polarization ahead of midterms,” *NBC News* (October 23, 2022). <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/first-read/anger-minds-nbc-news-poll-finds-sky-high-interest-polarization-ahead-m-rcna53512>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

88 Isaac Arnsdorf, “How a QAnon splinter group became a feature of Trump rallies,” *The Washington Post* (September 26, 2022) (quoting Donald J. Trump). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/09/26/trump-qanon-rallies-negative48/>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

89 The White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Continued Battle for the Soul of the Nation” (September 1, 2022) (describing Republicans who do not support the “right to choose, [the] right to privacy, [the] right to contraception, [and the] right to marry who you love”). <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/09/01/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-continued-battle-for-the-soul-of-the-nation/>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

When CCP propagandists preach that the United States is inherently wicked, racist, unjust, fractious, and ungovernable, too many modern Americans tend to agree. When Russian propagandists encourage the belief that all narratives are false—and that we should certainly *not* stand up for the fundamental values encoded in our own narratives—we have a hard time responding because we have already invested intellectual capital in preemptively deconstructing them ourselves, and in depicting our fellow citizens as disloyal traitors who are *at least* as threatening as any foreign dictator.

The reader should not mistake this for a partisan political comment, for—as the above quotations suggest—both the Left and the Right in the United States are at fault here. For some years, Leftist deconstructionism and critical theory warred all but alone against the reality of reason, objectivity, and prescriptive moral value, while depicting any who disagreed as ignorant, hate-filled, reactionary Neanderthals. Since reason, objectivity, and moral value are concepts without which it is difficult to imagine formulating any coherent narrative intended to persuade someone else that our approach to anything is actually *correct*, the spread of such thinking represented a major problem for the effectiveness of U.S. strategic messaging.

But the challenge today certainly does not come just from the Left. Today, much of the Right dismisses what it finds disagreeable as “fake news,” assigns moral and policy value on the basis of conformity with political positions—rather than adopting political positions on the basis of their moral and policy merit—and seems to reject even the *theoretical* existence of moral or factual standards by which one’s own assertions might be discredited or disproven.

Today, then, both ends of the U.S. spectrum are at once relativist *and* moralistic. They feel the need merely to assert their special rectitude rather than demonstrate or defend it, and they grip these assertions with a desperate insecurity that cannot tolerate question. (This is an anxious zeal because relativism precludes the genuine confidence that flows from demonstrable foundation, or at least from defensibility via reason, and through this prism they regard disagreement as treason and nuance as betrayal. Disagreement over a claim, after all, cannot possibly be only about interpretation, weight of fact, or matters actually to be investigated and assessed; it can only, it is assumed, be *personal*—aimed with malevolence

at the identity of the one making the assertion.⁹⁰) Both poles of the spectrum, moreover, cling to what are in effect elaborate and unfalsifiable conspiracy theories, in which the depravity and malignancy of their political opponents create or reinforce socio-cultural dynamics that make elements or aspects of our own society the primary threat to justice and good.

In such an environment, when it comes to persuasive strategic messaging, we clearly have a huge problem all the way around, and this amounts to giving a giant gift to Russian and Chinese propagandists. Information campaigning in strategic competition generally requires a clear and compelling narrative of “who” we are, “who” they are, and “why” it *matters*, whether or not one side or the other prevails. If we lack the intellectual and moral self-confidence to advance such a narrative, or if we don’t have a persuasive one, we are in a losing game. Successful messaging therefore requires a solid domestic foundation in our own conception of and belief in ourselves. If we lack such faith and self-confidence—that is, if we do not trust in our own basic rectitude—we will naturally fail to be persuasive to others.

It may sometimes seem as if we have lost our compass bearings in this respect, and of course our Russian and Chinese information antagonists are doing everything they can to encourage such moral and intellectual unsteadiness.⁹¹ But things are not hopeless, as perhaps the very structure of this strategic competition can remind us. As I have written elsewhere, it actually matters hugely who “wins” in this race:

90 In the political world, it turns out that relativism can encourage this sort of tribally performative moralism in those who jump from the idea that absolute objectivity is impossible to the conclusion that there is therefore no need to attempt it—and that an assertion’s merit is to be judged only on the basis of the passion with which it is voiced and the identity of the person voicing it. In the grip of such a false syllogism, compromise, or “agreeing to disagree” over anything of importance, is impermissible, because failing to validate every assertion of a presumptively authentic voice is to invalidate the identity of the speaker.

91 Not for nothing, for instance, did Vladimir Putin choose to devote portions of his speech at the 2022 Valdai Conference to what he claimed was a conflict between “traditional values” and the ideology of “Western elites” who “embrace ... strange and trendy ideas like dozens of genders or gay pride parades.” In his telling, there are “two Wests ... the West of traditional, primarily Christian values” and one that is an “aggressive, cosmopolitan, and neocolonial ... tool of neoliberal elites.” Openly attempting to exploit such divisions in support of Russian foreign policy goals—including aggression against Ukraine—Putin declared that those in the U.S. population who “adhere to traditional values ... are with us, we know that.” Remarks of Vladimir Putin, Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting (October 27, 2022). <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695>. Accessed November 10, 2022.

The reason that we care who prevails in this new era of great power competition is not simply that one side is our own—though that is, of course, quite relevant. This great struggle is not merely about shallow tribal self-identity. It also revolves around the crucial fact that our side represents humane values such as the rights-based democratic accountability found in representative government, fidelity to the rule of law, and the role of rights such as political, religious, and other forms of free expression in protecting basic human liberties, promoting human thriving, and preventing oppression. The reason we care about great power competition is that these values deserve support from all thinking persons, and it is our duty and moral obligation to support them, and to help them survive and ultimately triumph over authoritarianism, autocracy, intolerance, and tyranny.⁹²

If we can remind ourselves of this from time to time, perhaps we will find reasons to back out of the fetid swamplands of national self-loathing—that is, the angry conviction this country has become corrupted and unworthy due to the malignant “otherness” of our own fellow citizens—that have metastasized on both ends of our political spectrum. In so doing, moreover, we would do much more for America’s strategic effectiveness in “information competition” than any legion of fact-checkers could ever hope to accomplish alone.

92 Christopher A. Ford, “Principled Conservatism in America’s foreign Affairs and National Security Policy,” *Law and Policy Papers*, National Security Institute (June 2021), p8. <https://nationalsecurity.gmu.edu/national-security-institute-publishes-new-report-principled-conservatism-in-americas-foreign-affairs-and-national-security-policy/>. Accessed November 9, 2022.

Conclusion

I remain enough of an optimist to think it still possible for us to crawl out of the psychological and intellectual hole we have dug for ourselves, for America to regain its self-confidence, and for this country to mount effective responses to the information confrontation challenges of our security environment. But one should not pretend that such success will be easy, nor that it will be quick. One way or the other, however, our journey to meeting these challenges has to include admitting our own culpability in hobbling ourselves. We can do better.

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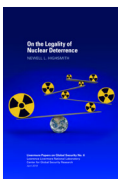


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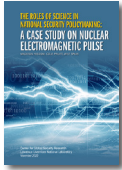
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